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ABSTRACT

The only child has traditionally been thought to lack appropriate social skills, self-esteem, or friends. Recent research, as summarized in this paper, contradicts these popular beliefs. In level of achievement and intelligence, only-children appear to have an advantage over children with siblings; research on their sociability and self-esteem has also revealed positive aspects. An interview conducted with parents and teachers of 10 4-year-old only-children in a Bronx Head Start program showed that stereotypes against only children are still influencing popular opinion. Teachers viewed only-children as more attention-seeking, more mature and intelligent, and tending to have undeveloped social skills. Parents expressed concern about their children's social skills, need for attention, and shortage of playmates, but felt that higher lifestyles and maturity levels were benefits of being only-children. (Includes recommendations for making the only-child's experience a positive one. Contains 27 references.) (EV)

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Spoiled Or Spectacular?

A look at the only child

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Fall, 1997

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Spoiled or Spectacular?

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Jeanette Carrasquillo

ABSTRACT

The only child has been looked at with pity and disdain. A child without siblings is often thought to be a child without social skills, self esteem or friends. Recent research has proven otherwise.

An only child is a lonely child they say;
There's no one around when ever I want to play
When Mama sings me a lullabye,
She says someday you will get a big surprise,
but she does not know that this is how I pray,
and how I pray.

Please do not send me down a baby brother,
it would make me so mad that I would want to spit,
there is nothing I have that I would give to it,
no bundle of heaven is gonna split with me.
We just can not afford to feed another,
I eat lollipops enough for two,
So please do not send me down a baby brother,
'cause if you do I will send him right back up to you!
-unknown

Elvis Presley, Frank Sinatra, Leonardo Da Vinci, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Hans Christian Andersen, Gloria Vanderbilt, Lisa Marie Presley, Julian Lennon. What do all of these famous people have in common? They are all only children. With so many achievements represented within this group, why is it that society has such a negative perception of the only child? Thompson summarized the prevailing view of the only child as "generally maladjusted, self-centered, self-willed, attention-seeking, dependent on others, temperamental, anxious, generally unhappy and unlikeable, yet, somewhat more autonomous than a child with two siblings" (1974, p95-96). This view has influenced many families to conceive a second time to avoid having their first child be unfairly stereotyped as spoiled or selfish.

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Since 1898, researchers have devoted their studies to understanding the characteristics of the only child. In this paper, we will explore the existing research and challenge the popular view of the only child.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"Being an only child is a disease in itself..."

- G. Stanley Hall

In the early 1920's, a professional in the field wrote: "It would be safer for the individual and the race that there should be no only children." Despite this warning, the occurrance of the single child family rose from 20% to 30% during the period of the 1920's to the 1940's. From the mid 1960's to the mid 1970's, it decreased to 15%. In the 1980's, it increased again to 30%. As of 1990, according to Martin O'Conell of the fertility Statistics Branch of the U.S. Bureau of the Census, 17 percent of women aged 40 to 44 had only had one child (Feinberg, 1994, p.30). The constant fluctuation of the number of single child families illustrates the conflicting views society has of the child without siblings.

Many factors have contributed to the shifts of these percentages. According to Dr. Toni Falbo, one of the country's leading authorities on only children and a professor of Educational psychology at the University of Texas in Austin, "during the Depression, economic factors were considered causal in lowering overall family size in the United States" (1983). However, the present increase in the number of only child families has been attributed to four factors: 1) advances in contraceptive technology, 2) increased employment of women, 3) inhibiting economic factors, and 4) increased marital instability" (Falbo, 1984). Fertility problems, high unemployment, death in the family or simply parents' choice can also be factors in having only one child.

In recent years, women's option to delay marriage due to professional obligations has narrowed their range of child bearing years. Today it's not only delays in marriage, but also the high expense of child rearing that influences parents' decision to limit their number of offspring. Another factor influencing the decision to have only one child is the importance placed by society on the type of person the only child will be. With these factors in mind, let us investigate the actuality of being an only child.

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ACHIEVEMENTS

Although society sees only children as being spoiled, conceited, assertive eggheads, they actually appear to be at an advantage. An important advantage of being an only child is having your parents' undivided attention. Onlies receive more frequent reinforcement from their parents and relatives. Because only children are always in the presence of adults, they learn adult-like speech and behaviors. They have closer relationships with their parents.

The outstanding level of achievement found within the only child community shows their great ability to triumph in the face of opposition. Searches for the psychological factors that account for this achievement effect have focused on the special relationship onlies and firstborns have with their parents. Achievement motivation had been thought to originate in the high standards for mature behavior that parents impose on their children at relatively early ages (Falbo, 1983). Parents' high expectations for their children, researchers believe, lead those children to have high standards for themselves and to be motivated to high levels of achievement.

EDUCATION - INTELLIGENCE

Studies have found that mothers of only children not only play with and talk to them more, but also notice and comment more on what their children do. The number and type of interactions parents have with their children, such as reading to them and answering their questions, have a great effect on how well children do in school. Educational achievement is generally very high on the list of priorities in the family of an only child. The parents of only children tend to be well-educated themselves, and they are likely to want their children to match or surpass their own accomplishments (Kappelman, 1975). Due to financial flexibility of the single-child family, the child is often able to attend private school, participate in more extracurricular activities, and go on to college. Judith Blake, professor of population policy at the University of California, Los Angeles, has found that on average, children from one child families get 20% more years of education than do children from families with several siblings. Only children show consistently superior scores in intelligence and reasoning to a point where a decision to skip a grade is often made at least once during the school career of an only child. All of these factors

contribute to the higher educational levels of adult only children, placing them at an advantage over non-onlies. Disproportionate numbers of first and only borns have been found among eminent men

(Ellis, 1904), faces on the cover of Time (Toman & Toman, 1970) and psychologists (Roe, 1953). Only children have been found to score slightly higher on measures of intelligence compared to children with siblings. The Scottish Council on Research in Education (1933, 1949, 1953) found that only children had as much as a 22 point I. Q. advantage over children who came from families with five or more children (Falbo, 1984). John Claudy, Ph.D., principal research scientist at the American Institutes for Research in Palo Alto, California, found that only children did slightly better on tests of both verbal and quantitative abilities. Again, the findings show that only children benefit from not having siblings.

SOCIAL

One area in which the only child does not surpass his/her non-only counterparts is sociability. John Claudy and his colleagues found that only children were more mature, socially sensitive, tidy, and "cultured", but were somewhat less sociable (Blake, 1981). This may be due to the fact that only children spend so much time in the company of adults that they speak and act like little adults. They are often rejected by other children because of this. On the other hand, one study of elementary school students indicated that the more children in a family, the less understanding a child had of "peer-focus roles" or what other children are like. Perhaps the presence or absence of siblings has little to do with the development of peer relationships.

Miller and Maruyama (1976) suggested that because only and first borns, between whom there were no differences, do not have older siblings, they acquire more autocratic, less interactive interpersonal styles and that this has negative consequences for peer popularity (Blake, 1981).

On the brighter side, recent research with very young children suggests that onlies may have more social skills than children with siblings, especially later born children (Falbo, 1983). Blake reports, "We know children in one-child families are more likely to play in other children's households. They thus have to adjust to more points of view and learn more social roles. They may develop more social sophistication because they are less bound by a sibling's views and get a better sense of how the world works socially." (1981) Only children may have fewer friends and a less intense social life, but they assume leadership positions in clubs and feel satisfied and happy with their lives.

Only children are likely to talk earlier and better than other children, see more of the world, spend more time in adult as well as children groups, enjoy more opportunities to pursue hobbies and

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other personal enthusiasms. Much proof exists that the only child is especially likely to develop rich inner resources that are deeply sustaining (Nachman & Thompson, 1977 p.6).

Since studying and other intellectual activities typically require concentrated periods of solitude, the development of a tolerance for being alone at an early age may also be helpful to the academic development of children from small families (Nachman & Thompson, 1977, p.78).

Fewer people may boast of being friends with an only child, but those lucky people who are enjoy a close, gratifying friendship.

SELF-ESTEEM

Psychiatrist Alan Summers once wrote, "If you want a happy life, don't be an only child. But if you want to achieve, create have interesting experiences, reach your potential, then you should be an only child ... (Sifford, 1986, p.33). Studies conducted by renowned only child researchers have reported that the self-esteem of only children is much higher that of children with siblings. Only children show more self-regard and self-confidence than non-onlies. The reason why these children seem to have higher self-esteems is because they receive more reinforcement, praise and attention from their parents. The constant supply of these character building forms of attention, resulted in the formation of a self-assured, well rounded individual. Only children are able to collect this appropriate attention, offered by the parents, and use it to form a positive self-image. The surplus of self-confidence helps them to become risk takers. This is one of the reasons why only children become such successful public figures. By being able to believe in themselves only children are able to maneuver others into believing in them too. It has been said that the self-esteem of the only child can be compared to this quote "A person who has grown up with money, who is accustomed to having money, always feels that he is wealthy, even he is virtually penniless (Sifford, 1986, p.23).

Studies show that only kids don't think of themselves as lonely or unhappy. Nor do they have lower self-esteem. Findings that suggest that only children compared with non-only children are generally more autonomous in terms of personal control, have higher levels or initiative or personal aspirations and motivation, are more industrious in terms of educational or occupational achievements and have stronger identities (as indexed by self-esteem or adjustment levels) are not new in the only child literature (Falbo, 1984, 1986).

AN INTERVIEW WITH PARENTS & TEACHERS

When the son of one of the authors turned three, family and friends started dropping hints that it was time for this child to have a sibling to play with. Every time he acted up, these well-meaning people said it was because he was lonely and bored with being an only child. He was enrolled in Head Start so that he'd have other children to play with and to learn the lessons of childhood from. According to family and friends, this was not the same thing, and the child is still missing out on a vital part of life. According to his teachers, this child gets along very well with both children and adults, is bright for his age, and shows great independence. This contradicts long-held views about only children which date back to the late 1800's, when E.W. Bohannon led the world to believe that only children do not do as well academically or socially as children with siblings. For decades after this, prominent psychologists, psychiatrists, and scientists reinforced these beliefs, adding that only children are domineering, egotistical, selfish, overly dependent, and maladjusted.

We went to Bronx Head Starts to interview parents and teachers of ten 4-year old only children. We asked them multiple choice questions and open-ended questions about the children's social and emotional skills to determine whether the old stereotypes about only children have diminished or are still popular.

Before beginning the interview, we asked the parents why they had stopped with just one child. They gave a variety of reasons. Some of their reasons were similar to those we read about during our research: death of a parent, divorce, and financial problems. Other reasons given were: child's father is in jail; first child is too difficult to handle (discipline); parenthood is more than they bargained for and; they just don't want another child. Two of the mothers confided that they had had abortions rather than bearing a second child.

Nine out of ten respondents to the parent survey are only in their twenties, yet none of them plan to have any more children. Only children in America account for 20 million small families, and the number is rising.

The results of our survey show that the stereotypes against the only child are still influencing popular opinion.

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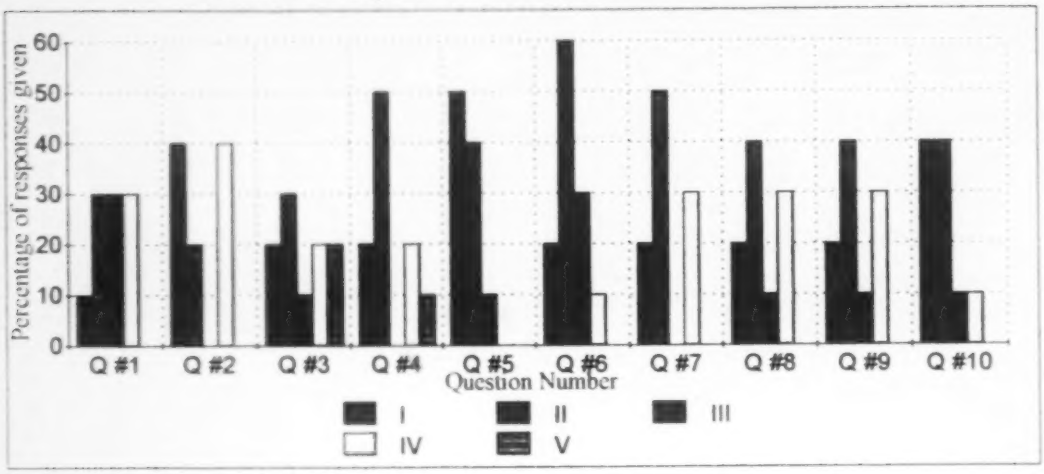
Teacher Responses to Multiple Choice Questions



I=Strongly agree/always/very high

II=Agree/often/high

III=Neutral

IV=Disagree/sometimes/low

V=Strongly disagree/never/very low

When asked whether the only child plays more creatively than a non-only child, 10% of teachers strongly agreed, 30% agreed, 30% were neutral, and 30% disagreed.

When asked whether the only child is more attention-seeking than a non-only child, 40% of the teachers strongly agreed, 20% agreed, and 40% disagreed.

When asked if the only child is more dependent than a non-only child, 20% of respondents strongly agreed, 30% agreed, 10% were neutral, 20% disagreed, and 20% strongly disagreed.

When asked if the only child initiates his own play, 20% of the teachers said always, 50% said often, 20% said sometimes, and 10% said never.

50% of the teachers said the only child always participates in groups, 40% said he often does, and 10% were neutral.

60% of the teachers agree that the only child interacts well with peers, 30% were neutral, and 10% disagree.

When asked if the only child demonstrates self control, 20% of the teachers strongly agreed, 50% agreed, and 30% disagreed.

20% of the teachers feel that the only child is always generally happy, 10% feel that he is often happy, 40% were neutral, 20% feel the only child is sometimes happy, and 10% think the only child is never happy.

When asked how they rated the only child's level of self-esteem, 20% of the teachers said very high, 40% said high, 10% were neutral, and 30% said low.

40% of the teachers strongly agree that the only child would be different if he had siblings, 40% agree, 10% were neutral, and 10% disagree.

Teacher Responses to Open-Ended Questions

Teachers were asked how the behavior of only children differs from that of children with siblings. They answered that the only children are more mature, often seek more attention, and tend to have undeveloped social skills.

When asked about strengths and weaknesses of only children, teachers told us that they are very helpful and affectionate towards adults, but tend to be somewhat bossy towards other children.

Teachers in our survey said that, although only children like to take the leadership role when playing, the other children like them and relate to them well. They generally have successful interactions with their peers.

Most teachers noted no special needs of the only child, while a few suggested they need socialization skills.

When asked how these particular only children were different from other only children they have taught, the respondents said that these children are more adult-like, street smart, and intelligent.

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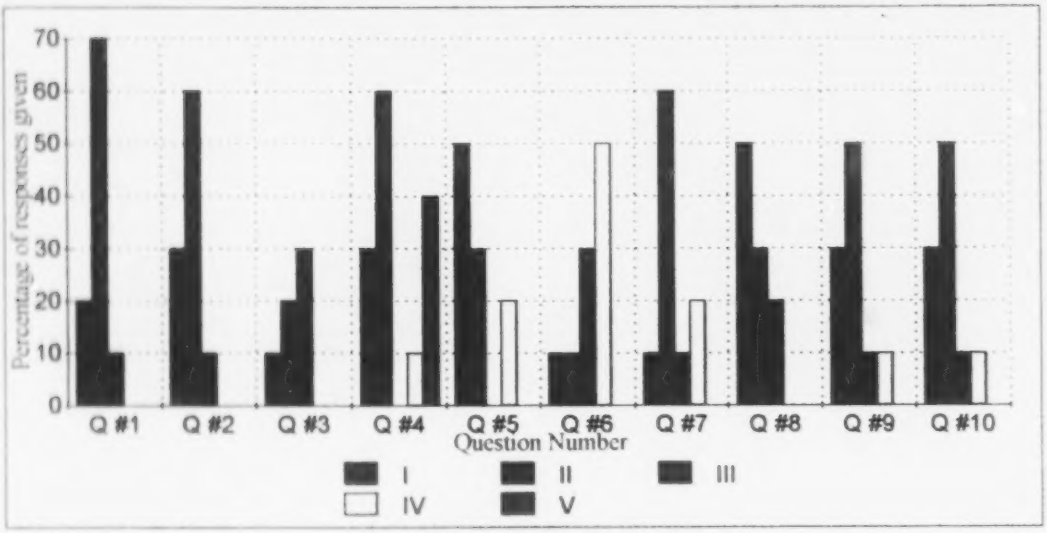
Parent Responses to Multiple Choice Questions



I=Strongly agree/always/very high

II=Agree/often/high

III=Neutral

IV=Disagree/sometimes/low

V=Strongly disagree/never/very low

When asked if their child brings creativity in his/her play, 20% of the parents strongly agreed, 70% agreed, and 10% were neutral.

When asked if their child often seeks undivided attention, 30% strongly agreed, 60% agreed, and 10% were neutral.

When asked if they often find themselves helping their child complete a task, 10% strongly agreed, 20% agreed, 30% were neutral, and 40% strongly disagreed.

30% of the parents surveyed felt that their child always initiates his/her own play, 60% said often, and 10% said sometimes.

50% of the parents said their child always has the opportunity to play with other children, 30% said they often do, and 20% said they sometimes do.

When asked if their child is able to share and take turns, only 10% said always, 10% said often, 30% were neutral, and 50% said the children sometimes share and take turns.

When asked if their child demonstrates self-control, 10% of the parents said they always do, 60% said they often do, 10% were neutral, and 20% said sometimes.

50% of the parents surveyed believe that their only child always seems to be generally happy, 30% said their child is often happy, and 20% were neutral.

30% of the parents rate their child's level of self-esteem as very high, 50% say it is high, 10% were neutral, and 10% said their child has low self-esteem.

When asked if they thought their child would be different if s/he had siblings, 30% of our parents strongly agreed, 50% agreed, 10% were neutral, and 10% disagreed.

Parents' Responses to Open-Ended Questions

The parents were asked if they felt that their children have any special needs because they are onlies. They expressed concern about the children's social skills, need for attention, and shortage of playmates. They feel that some things are better for their children because they are onlies, (ie., they have better lifestyles and are more mature). They also feel that some things are worse for their only children, like loneliness and missed opportunities to be around other children.

SUMMARY

In general, questions that asked about the negative social and emotional behaviors of the only child scored slightly higher than we expected. The questions that portray the only child in a positive light did not get the percentage of responses we were looking for. We had hoped that people today would be more accepting of the only child. Recent studies suggest that only children are not spoiled or maladjusted. Although our results contradict those of recent studies, they support the popular stereotypes of the only child. In our continuing quest to eradicate these misconceptions, we will dedicate the remaining segment of this paper to providing a number of helpful suggestions for parents and teachers to assist the only child in becoming a well-rounded adult.

GUIDE TO CREATING THE SPECTACULAR ONLY CHILD

Being an only child can be a happy experience. Focusing upon the advantages and minimizing the disadvantages is the key. Parents are the determining factor. Parents must encourage their child to make his or her own decisions early in life. Only if the ability to make the simplest decisions is developed in the beginning can the child go on to the more intricate personal problem solving needed in later years (Kappelman, 1975, p 151-155).

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From the time of early childhood, parents should provide ample opportunities for their child to develop strong ties with other children close in age so that the child will have chances to acquire, practice, and refine his social skills. With the help of the parents, the only child will get all the "real life" experiences he needs. He will also learn how to begin to forge the kind of loving connections and fast friendships that develop in the happiest sibling relationships.

It is a good idea to resist the temptation to overindulge the only child with things because he easily comes to expect the most. Overindulging can have the effect of promoting that stereotype of the only child being spoiled.

Remember that the only child needs to be part of a child's world. Because they are mature for their age, only children are often called upon to provide companionship for a lonely parent, or as an assistant (read "pet") to a teacher. Adults must distinguish between the grown-ups' world and the child's world.

Teachers should not surrender to the only child's demands for extra attention. Do not worry about the child's complaints about you being a mean teacher. All children must be treated equally in the classroom, to allow them to learn how to socialize and interact among themselves. Only children already have a strong relationship with adults (parents, relatives), they must be allowed to establish strong peer relationships.

The only child should not be rushed into adulthood. On the other hand, he should not be babied, or prevented from growing up emotionally.

CONCLUSION

The authors feel that there is a great need for the general public to be educated in the realities of the only child. We find that the only child is still believed to be at a disadvantage and is, in fact, discriminated against because of his single status. Once the fact that he has no siblings is disclosed, people automatically assume that they are in the presence of a spoiled, selfish, antisocial being. This, however, is not necessarily the case.

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